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The Break Up of the Poor Law: Being the Minority Report of the Poor Law Commission. Edited by SIDNEY and BEATRICE WEBB. (New York: Longmans, Green and Company. 1902. Two volumes. Pp. xvii, 601; xiii, 345.

It is a matter for congratulation that Mr. and Mrs. Webb have seen fit to republish in convenient form the second half of the immense blue book, containing the report of the royal commission on the English poor law, which was issued by the king's printer in February, 1909. This blue book runs to 1238 folio pages, and its very size and clumsiness make it most improbable that it will be widely read. The minority report, which is signed by four of the eighteen members of the royal commission—Rev. Prebendary, H. R. Wakefield, Mr. Francis Chandler, Mr. George Lansbury, and Mrs. Sidney Webb—is founded in large part of the same evidence as the majority report, and in many respects is in agreement with it. The main difference between the two reports is that the minority report recognizes the evils, which were acknowledged and deplored by the whole commission, to be the result of the poor law system rather than to be due to the shortcomings of the members of the present boards of guardians. The remedy, therefore, is considered by Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Webb and Mrs. Webb's three colleagues of the minority, to lie in a complete change of system rather than in a mere change of name from boards of guardians to public assistance committees; or in any change of area, or of method in selecting the members of the committees or boards. The majority report recommends the retention of the system of dealing with all forms of destitution, except lunacy—with old age, sickness, widows, children and the able-bodied unemployed—through one authority; but desires to get rid of the evils that have crept into English poor law administration by a change in the name and constitution of this authority.

The minority members, on the other hand, freely recognize the integrity, humanity and ability of the men and women who form the present boards of guardians. "We have found," they write, "no evidence that the corrupt and criminal practices, which have unhappily occurred in certain places, are at all frequent or widespread. Nor have we reason to suppose that the evil influences of electoral or social pressure have been otherwise than exceptional. We have indeed been impressed by the vast amount of zealous and devoted service, unremunerated and unrecognized, that is being rendered in all parts of the poor law administration of the United Kingdom by men and women of humanity and

experience. We ascribe the defects and shortcomings of the present administration of outdoor relief to the very nature of the local authority to which this duty is entrusted." And again when reviewing the condition of the children under the poor law they write: "We have indeed been much impressed by the humanity, zeal and self-sacrificing industry displayed by the members of these authorities—especially the women members—in all their dealings with the children. The failure is certainly as great in the large unions, wielding practically the whole powers of populous urban communities, as it is in the smaller ones. Thus no alteration in the membership, no enlargement of the area of the destitution authority, would remedy the defects that now stand revealed." The minority members do not believe that a mere change of name, nor a change from popular election to a mixed system of appointment and co-option would effect the necessary reformation. The reason for the failure of the English poor law and for its gradual supersession by the sanitary authorities in the provision of isolation hospitals and other medical services; by the education authorities in the provision of meals for underfed children; and by the distress committees of the municipal councils in providing work for the unemployed, lies in the miscellaneous and incompatible nature of the duties which are now entrusted to the boards of guardians. These duties are typified in the general mixed workhouse, which is anathema to Mr. and Mrs. Webb.

The general mixed workhouse has been condemned by every poor law commission since 1834. When the great reform of 1834 was effected, the recommendation of the poor law commission of 1832–1834 and the intention of parliament were that each union should carefully segregate the different classes that came under their care. Separate buildings were to be provided for the sick, the aged, the children and the able-bodied unemployed. The result, however, of entrusting all these classes to the same authority was the erection of one strong, efficient building instead of the series of detached and specialized establishments. The minority report reviews the efforts that have been made by the local government board to induce the boards of poor law guardians to give specialized treatment to the different classes under their charge. These efforts have been especially urgent in regard to the treatment of children, and yet the poor law commission of 1906–1909 found that there were no fewer than 15,000 children in the general mixed workhouses of England. It is not that the boards of guardians have made no attempt to carry out the directions of the local govern-

ment board. Experiment after experiment has been made in setting apart buildings for the aged, for the children, and for the vagrants; but in every case after a few years the tendency to crumble back into promiscuity has made itself manifest. This tendency is chiefly due to a sense of economy. The destitution authority is always apt to have an unequal balance of cases to attend to. The specialized buildings are not fully used by the class for which they are intended, and the tendency is to fill up the vacant places with the overflow of other cases. A large number of examples of this tendency are given. Bradford, in Yorkshire, erected "a charming quadrangle of separate tenements for their respectable aged" and yet, because there was some room to spare, they could not resist the temptation of placing in it their sane epileptics, nor even, a little later, of using vacant space for a test yard for able-bodied men who had to be placed under the same superintendent as the epileptics and the respectable old men and women. Poplar, Kensington and Birmingham established test workhouses with severe labor regulations for able-bodied men. These were so great a success in keeping the able-bodied off the poor law that the workhouses stood half empty. The temptation in each case proved too great. The vacant space was filled with semi-able-bodied, infirm and aged, and the rigorous labor test could no longer be enforced. These establishments again crumbled into general mixed workhouses.

Except for the workhouse nurseries, and for the arrangements for the care of infants and little children in the general mixed workhouses, the minority finds no cause for scandal in the management of modern English workhouses. "We have," reads the report in the section on sickness, "come across in workhouse sick wards no such scandalous instances of overcrowding, of dirt or insanitation as were formerly revealed in workhouse enquiries, and, we are glad to add, no such neglect or inhumanity." The workhouses are usually understaffed both as regards the care of the sick and of children. Pauper inmates are utilized as far as possible for this important work, but this is chiefly due to the fact that the whole of the English poor law is based on the idea that the lot of the pauper must be made less desirable than that of the lowest grade of self-supporting laborers, and also on the fact that one of the most important duties of the boards of guardians is to "save the rates," to reduce expenditure to as low a level as possible.

The remedy for the evils which have been made startlingly prominent through the enquiries of the poor law commission, which is put forward by the minority of the commission is simple, scientific and statesman-

like. Already, they point out, the poor law has begun to break up. Sanitary authorities have trenched upon its province as regards infancy and sickness; local education authorities as regards children of school age; lunacy boards in the care of the insane; pension committees of the central government in the provision for the aged, and municipal councils in assisting the unemployed to find work. Everywhere there is waste and confusion due to these overlappings. It is plainly impossible to turn back and to stifle the activities of these younger and more modern brothers of the poor law. The only possible course is to eliminate the old, unspecialized destitution authorities, and to let each of the newer authorities cover completely the special field it has already made its own. To coördinate all, to prevent overlapping, and especially to enforce personal, parental and family responsibility, there must be an official register, appointed by the central government, who, acting on principles clearly laid down by parliament, shall recover the cost of all relief from individuals relieved, or from their parents or children when any of these are in circumstances that justify such repayments. Parental responsibility which now means that if a man is able to support his children and fails to do so, the children are allowed to suffer or die, will then mean that the child shall not be short of food, shelter, clothing, or medical attendance; that the father must provide these, or failing to do so the state must step in and supply the needs of the children, collecting afterwards the payment from the delinquent father.

As Mr. and Mrs. Webb point out, there are still many details in the scheme of the minority which need further elaboration, and it may be a long time before any such scheme can be wholly carried out. But socialism has so far offered nothing in the way of construction, evolutionary statesmanship to compare with the plan outlined in these two volumes of the minority report of the poor law commission. In these volumes, the references to authorities and to evidence printed in the blue book are omitted for the sake of brevity and compactness; and, unfortunately for the student, Mr. and Mrs. Webb have not considered it necessary to add an index.

A. G. PORRITT.